

# MENTAL ILLNESS?

With the best will in the world it is virtually impossible to broach this subject without prompting strong emotions and opinions. Your point of view will depend entirely on whether or not you feel that horses are intelligent and to what level this intelligence is developed.

As discussed in previous articles, the question of intelligence is highly controversial and I personally keep a very open mind when assessing an individual horse and will always approach the animal with the utmost respect for who and what the horse has evolved to be. However, in my many years of training and re-schooling horses I have had the opportunity to occasionally come across such bizarre behaviour patterns that if one were to relate them to a human being then the person would probably have a mental illness or condition.

Not wishing to sound too controversial (so not like me!!!) and not wishing to offend anyone, I would like you to consider that in our own evolutionary past there must have been occasions when an individual was born either with a mental handicap, or suffered an injury or illness that resulted in some form of mental disorder. The harsh reality of nature is such that if this was the case then there was an extreme probability if not certainty that these individuals would have died. It should even be considered that genetic aberrations in mental capacities is part and parcel of natural selection with those mental alterations that are beneficial for the individual and species being successful and those that are not being unsuccessful. As our society has developed and our ability to understand, treat and care for those sufferers of such conditions has improved then those unfortunate to be affected by such can lead normal and happy lives.

There are breakthroughs happening all the time in our ability to understand the complex nature of conditions such as autism one of which is the realisation that most autistic people tend to think in pictures rather than words. There have been startling discoveries amongst the scientific community that most if not all animals also think in pictures and this may explain why autistic people benefit so much from close contact with animals, especially horses.

If such mental conditions can affect humans could it be possible then that animals can also have mental conditions? Of course I must stress that this would only be within the individual animal's reasoning ability and normal mental processes that this could occur. In other words I am not suggesting that a guinea pig can be a paranoid schizophrenic but what I am suggesting is that a guinea pig can show abnormal mental processes which manifest themselves as behavioural problems. Again, in the wild a guinea pig who is not behaving normally would probably have a very short life span and be targeted by a predator pretty quickly. On this note let us re-examine some of the bizarre cases I have witnessed.

99.99% of all behavioural problems are caused by a physiological problems, physical problem or pain. The real talent is in finding where the pain is and hopefully curing it. I was asked to advise on three separate horses who were showing abnormal behaviour and had been referred to me.

1. The first case was a mare who was a confirmed blind bolter. This meant that she would gallop without any regard to her safety or the riders. She could be turned but could not be stopped unless the rider was thrown or jumped off, then she would stop dead and stand trembling and bemused. The horse had been checked for neck, back, shoulder and pelvis issues, her legs and joints had been checked as had her teeth. Nothing could be found to explain her behaviour. What at first struck me about her was her superb temperament. She was such a nice natured horse to work with from the ground. However, once mounted you had a time limit of 30mins before she bolted. This was the only trigger we could isolate, time. You could walk for 30 mins then she would bolt or jump a course of 5ft fences for 25 mins and she would be fine as long as you got off before her 30 min were up. It was as if she had a timer inside her that would go off and trigger the bolting. The other interesting factor was she was a mare who did not hold weight well and was always thin and rangy.

2. The second case was a horse who was extremely aggressive with other horses, to the point where he could only be turned out alone. This was what the owners felt, but on questioning it became apparent that this aggression was triggered by fear and he was attacking the other horses because he was afraid

of them. It was possible to ride him out with only one horse who he seemed to like and tolerate but no one else. He then began to stop mid-stride in the arena and rear in panic. This would happen in any pace and was becoming very dangerous. No trigger at first could be found but again on questioning it became clear that the arena was next to the field and he only behaved like this if he was heading towards another horse even if they were grazing some distance away in the field. This confirmed that he was afraid of horses. I received a phone call one day to say that he had suddenly and without provocation attacked and kicked his "friend" horse whilst they had been out hacking and had injured the rider of the other horse. This was not a good sign.

3. The third case was a horse who had been a safe and secure riding school horse who had been on a hack with his buddies and the rider had been galloping. They all stopped and turned around to head back along the track for another run. For no reason the horse bolted violently to the left, carrying the rider through trees at speed and nearly careering over a cliff. The rider managed to stop him with difficulty and dismounted and led him home. Over a very short period of time the owner noticed his behaviour in the stable was changing. One minute he would be aggressive and narky the next his usual sweet self. He was also beginning to lose weight at an alarming rate and the owner contacted her vet to carry out various tests to try to isolate the problem.

The first case study did not end well. Despite our best efforts it was decided to have the horse destroyed for safety reasons. A post mortem examination revealed a brain tumour. The strange pattern of behaviour demonstrated by this horse never left my mind and when I was referred the second case study I was immediately suspicious. I discussed at length with the owner that I felt her horse was almost "hallucinating" and did not perceive other horses to be horses. We were working along the lines that perhaps he had been frightened by another horse and we were hoping to try to overcome his fears using his only friend. However, I began to suspect there may be more to things as his behaviour deteriorated and he began to spook at absolutely nothing, even when being led. The final straw was when he attacked his companion horse injuring the rider and the decision was made to have the horse put down. Unfortunately there was no post mortem carried out so we will never know for sure if there was a pathology in his brain. By the time the third case was referred to me I had compiled a fair bit of knowledge and he was falling into almost exactly the same pattern of behaviour demonstrated by the previous two. He was bolting for no reason, was unaware of his surroundings, spooked at nothing, was aggressive then passive from one moment to the next, he seemed to be afraid of other horses and was losing weight. I was upfront with the owner about what I suspected and she had booked him in for an in depth investigation at her veterinary hospital. I suggested that they took samples of spinal fluid to see if there were any indicators of chemical imbalances in the brain. However, before they could take the spinal fluid (all the other tests were negative) he took an aggression fit and attacked one of the staff. The decision was made to put the horse down. A post mortem CT scan showed that he had lesions on his brain stem.

These poor horses had been affected by disease and this was triggering their abnormal behaviour. However, I did meet fairly recently a horse who was a whole other ball game. I will not go into detail about her behaviour, suffice to say that she would not willingly move away from a guide line. For example, you could ride her all day in the arena as long as you worked against the rail, all hell would break loose if you tried to turn her across the school and take her away from the fence she was following. The same applied on a hack, she was fine as long as she was following the kerb or pavement, just don't try to turn across the road. She was not motivated by following another horse and was disinterested in socialising with other horses. The frightening thing about this mare was her eyes. The best way of describing them would be to compare them to the eyes of a shark, very black, very cold and very dead. We had her eyesight checked out thinking perhaps she was partially sighted or blind, but she was given the all clear and did not show any other signs of possible blindness. Her behaviour was purely linked with being worked. I remember I was working her in the school on the long lines and the session was being watched by a human psychologist. We were trying to work the mare off the rails on a circle and it was some job I can tell you. She tried everything she could to get back to the side of the arena, she even managed to pull the line from my hand at one point. We eventually ended the session with the mare completing one quiet circle in trot in both directions. As we were leaving the psychologist asked if I had noticed anything odd about the horse's behaviour. I thought for a moment then said that I felt the mare was very clever in her methods of trying to get her own way and was constantly trying to outthink me. What the psychologist said next sent a chill through me. She said that at no time had the horse's pulse rate got up, she had been calm, calculating and

detached through the whole performance, she said that if she had been human she would probably have been a clinical psychopath.

This is of course a very controversial statement and the psychologist was looking at the horse's behaviour in direct comparison to a human being. Horses do not think like human beings so you cannot say for certain that she was a psychopath. However, her behaviour was very calculating and very dangerous at times and the intelligent way she would manipulate a situation to suit herself did leave me very worried. This incident really made me think, was it possible for horses to have similar mental illnesses or conditions just like humans? If so then why does it seem to be happening more and more and why were there no historical cases to back up this theory?

The reasons were simple and brutal. The horse is a working animal and as such any behaviour or traits that were not acceptable were eliminated by destruction. Even if the animal was not destroyed he or she would more than likely have been rejected or abandoned by the mare as a foal. There are known medical conditions caused by oxygen deprivation to the brain during birth. The common names for this condition are "Dummies, Barkers and Wanderers". These names are very old and were an indication of behaviour shown by the foal. The foal with brain damage would lie quiet like a dummy and make no attempt to interact with the mare or even try to rise. The mares would often strike at the foal trying to make him or her rise to such an extent that they could accidentally kill or seriously injure their offspring. If the foal survived the dummy stage he or she would start to make a strange barking sound, again this often triggered aggressive behaviour in the mare which often resulted in either total rejection or an attack on the foal. Again, if the foal survived the barking stage he or she would eventually rise and begin to wander aimlessly around, the urge to suckle overriding but the ability to coordinate and focus on the task either absent or extremely limited. At this point mares would often walk away and leave their foals to die or refuse to let them suckle. Those foals that finally got it together and did begin to suckle would have some limited levels of brain damage which may or may not have impacted in their ability to socialise and their trainability.

In today's world the costs of breeding are very high with the foal being a very valuable commodity. Medical science has developed to such a high degree that very often human intervention will enable seriously ill foals to survive to adult hood. Even those foals who have been rejected by the mare can be successfully adopted by another animal or hand reared. The controversial question I am going to ask is how many of those foals, who in the wild would have died at birth or been rejected, grow up with abnormal behaviour traits? I must stress that I suspect a very small percentage would fall into this category and that many of the foals saved will grow up into normal and happy horses with a very productive working life. But is it possible that due to the intervention of humans, some horses who may have some levels of brain damage which causes them to have abnormal behaviour patterns are surviving? Is this why we seem to be finding more and more horses with behavioural problems that have no physical explanations, have not been caused by trauma or abuse but simply put are showing some types of psychosis?

I do not know the answer for sure, but what I do know is that nature has provided the horse with exceptional perception and keen senses and just as some dogs seem able to "smell" medical conditions in humans and can be trained to do so, is it possible that the mare can "sense" something that is just not right with her foal that may, in the wild, jeopardise the safety of the herd? Who are we then to question her judgement, after all the only people who really know horses are horses themselves. I am not condoning leaving foals to die when lives could be saved, but it would be very interesting to map the progress of such foals and see if any patterns are formed. What is very interesting to note is that the "clinical psychopath" mare had been rejected as a foal and was hand reared by professionals who did not make any of the "mistakes" associated with hand reared horses. It was also interesting that the mare had never been accepted by other horses into their "herd" and had always been driven out from the group. Perhaps they knew something we didn't?

So, if we do have horses that suffer from mental illness what can be done? The simple answer is very little or nothing. Medical conditions can be treated but abnormal mental processes, very unlikely. The reason being is we are only now beginning to understand how animals think and reason and as yet we are still unsure as to what is normal for a species and what is abnormal. Just because a horse shows a behaviour trait that is unsuitable for humans and makes them difficult to work, those traits may be perfectly normal for a horse and in fact may be a throwback to more primitive times before

domestication. An example would be the horse that will not have anything to do with people and will only stay with and associate with other horses. This is normal for a horse, we were there predators and before domestication no self respecting horse would associate with a human. What I would say is, it is worth considering the implications and impact of human intervention and we should examine our motives for doing so very carefully. You cannot blame the horse for their actions, if we have created the situation then quite simply we will have to deal with it.